N.I.B. BULLETINS
No. 6

THE CARE
OF THE
BLIND BABY

With an Introduction by
ERIC PRITCHARD, M.D.

Price 3d.

Published by the
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND
(Registered under the Blind Persons Act, 1920)
224-6-8 Great Portland Street, London, W.1.

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INTRODUCTION

IN my capacity as Consulting Physician to the National Institute for the Blind, I have occasion to examine a large number of candidates for admission to one or other of its Sunshine Homes for Blind Babies, and I have also had full opportunity for observing the progress made by the children after varying periods of residence in these institutions. My duties have also involved the interviewing of a corresponding number of parents or guardians. I have therefore had ample opportunities of acquainting myself with the difficulties which are presented by the care of these children in the home.

However intelligent and however self-sacrificing the mothers of these children may be, the task of successfully bringing them up is a very difficult one, and in order to help them, the various experiences gained by those who have had the care of blind children in the Sunshine Homes and elsewhere have been pooled, and the compilation of this little leaflet has thus been rendered possible.

In my opinion this work has been most excellently done, and I believe that it will prove a real boon and help to those who have a blind child to look after, and who are not, for any reason, able to arrange for the child to be sent to one of the Sunshine Homes.

ERIC PRITCHARD.

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The Care of the Blind Baby

General Care

IT is not proposed in this leaflet to say anything about general infant care, though of course in many ways the care of the blind baby is on the same lines as that of the seeing. Both should be kept scrupulously clean, be regularly and suitably fed, wear light, warm comfortable clothing which gives ample freedom of movement, have as much fresh air as possible, and get plenty of sleep in well-ventilated rooms, or in the open air.

The mother who cares for her blind baby's progress will take every advantage of the help given at Infant Welfare Centres, and will value the advice of the Health Visitor just as much as the wise mother of a seeing baby does.

There is no reason why a blind baby should not be as healthy as a seeing one, putting on weight as regularly, and making just as good progress in every way, but because the mother who has to bring up a blind baby has a more difficult task before her than the parents of a seeing child, this leaflet sets out a few suggestions that may be of help to her in the first five years before her child goes to school.

Three Types of Parents

Teachers in schools for the blind tell us that the parents of children admitted to schools for the blind generally fall into one of three classes.

There are, first of all, those who think that so long as their baby is properly fed, clothed, and kept

clean, their duty towards him is finished. They neglect his mental development, talking to him very little, leaving him for long hours in his cot or perambulator, and sometimes even looking upon him rather as a burden.

Then, secondly, and quite at the other end of the scale, there are those mothers who are genuinely devoted to their child, but who are nervous of letting him do anything for himself because of his blindness. They dress and undress him, wash him, feed him, and carry him about, not merely in the first year or so, when every infant is dependent and helpless, but long afterwards, sometimes for six, seven, or even ten years. And in consequence, their blind child grows up to be timid, self-centred, spoiled, and unintelligent, and not nearly as happy as his little brothers and sisters, who, because they could see, have learned to fend for themselves. Every little child wants to be as much like the others as possible when he goes to school, and to be teased and called a baby by the other children upsets him dreadfully.

Lastly, there are those sensible mothers who love their baby, and are never in the least neglectful of him, but who realise that the truest kindness is to train their little child almost from the beginning to help himself.

Such mothers do not forget for one moment that blindness imposes a heavy handicap, but they remember that although the knowledge of their child's blindness may make them sad, the child himself is not conscious of any sadness, and may be just as happy as a seeing baby if properly cared for. From the child's earliest years they try to do whatever they can to enable him to overcome the handicap of blindness, and they never let him hear such expressions as "The poor little thing is afflicted." In this way, though he will discover in time that there is a difference between him and his brothers and sisters who can see, such a discovery will come gradually, and with no sense of shock.

The Importance of Early Training

People sometimes talk as if education were something that only begins when a child first goes to school, but they forget that it is in the first five or six years of life that the foundations of education are laid. This is specially true of a blind child, whose training in the years before schooling begins is even more important than that of the seeing. For unless the little blind child comes to school able to feed himself, trained in habits of personal cleanliness, and able to wash and dress himself with only a little help, his teachers will find it quite impossible to make a beginning in ordinary subjects like reading and writing, and will have to spend precious time teaching him those other things that he ought to have learned at home. It is for mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, to help the blind child in his early years, so that he may make the very best use of the opportunities that school offers when his schooldays begin. How then is this to be done ?

Patience in Training

At the outset, it is perhaps necessary to give a word of warning to the mother of a blind baby. She will have to be unendingly patient if her blind child's development seems slow, but, just because she is the child's mother, she should be able to exercise that patience, remembering that if she perseveres she will find the difficulties lessen, and a baby who seems very backward at first often does wonderfully well later on. When progress seems disappointingly slow, it sometimes helps a mother to look back, say, a week or a month, and she will almost always find, if during that time she has been trying steadily to train her baby, that he has made definite progress. Over and over again, the wise mother of a blind baby restrains herself, as the child gets older, from doing things for him, however slow and clumsy he seems to be when she tries to teach him to do them for himself. It is, of course,

so much easier and quicker to do a thing oneself than to stand patiently by while a four-year-old tries to put on his own socks with little fingers that seem "all thumbs," but it is well worth while to try to exercise that patience in the interests of the child, only coming to his rescue if it seems that his unsuccessful efforts are making him too discouraged.

Early Months of Life

For the first five or six months of life, the baby's physical state is all that concerns the mother, whose duty it is to see that he is kept clean and comfortable, that he is properly fed, and that he has plenty of sleep. It is possible from the beginning of life to start to train the baby in habits of cleanliness, by attending regularly to his needs in this way, and such training, from a very early age, will prove more than worth while.

When the early months are over, and the baby no longer sleeps nearly all the time, but has reached a time when, if he could see, he would be beginning to "take notice," it is time for his special training as a blind baby to begin.

Hearing, Touch and Smell

The seeing baby, when he begins to take notice, lies in his cot, and sees people coming and going about him, and can watch his mother as she moves backwards and forwards about the room, but for the blind baby the senses of touch and hearing (and, in a lesser degree, the sense of smell) must suffice. It is therefore very important, as early as possible, to help the blind baby to make as much use of these senses as we can.

Before long he learns to recognise his mother's voice, and the voices of his brothers and sisters, and it is therefore important that those who have to do with a blind baby should talk as gently and clearly as possible, both when they are talking directly to him, and when they are talking to others in his presence. We sometimes hear even kind-hearted mothers "shout

at " their children, and although we know that their bark is worse than their bite, it is very bad for the blind baby's nerves, and often very frightening for him, to hear harsh ugly voices raised about him, even though he may be too young to understand the meaning of what is said.

The mother of a blind baby should talk to it frequently, using the same simple words over and over again, so that they become familiar long before the baby begins to talk himself. Before he is a year old he will understand a great deal of what is said to him, and will have begun to imitate simple sounds that he has heard often repeated. It is a good plan each day when dressing and undressing him to name the garments as each is put on, or taken off, and when bathing him to name the different parts of his body as each in turn is touched. In this way, the senses of hearing and touch combine, and little by little the baby learns the meaning of a number of words. When he is old enough to begin to talk it is sometimes a help for the mother to put his hand on her lips as she says a familiar word, for this will encourage him to imitate the word that is being said.

Nursery Rhymes

Even before a seeing child has learned to talk he generally begins to take an interest in picture-books, and likes to point out the gee-gee or the bunny on their pages, and the blind child, who has to grow up in a world that has no picture-books, is bound to lose a good deal. But quite small blind children, like seeing ones, take an interest in nursery rhymes, and when baby begins to talk he will like to have the nursery jingles repeated to him, and to learn to repeat them himself. The rhymes where some action is included are the most suitable for him, like " This little pig went to market," " Ride a cock-horse," or " Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man."

eaching Baby to Feed Himself

Every blind baby should be taught to feed himself, and a beginning can be made when he is about a year old, or even earlier. By that time he will have learned to take an interest in his spoon, partly because it is a plaything which he likes to bang on the table, and partly because it is connected in his mind with the pleasure of meal-times. At first the mother may put baby's hand on the spoon as she lifts it to his mouth, and she will find that before long he likes to help, and will soon grip the spoon with his own fist. By degrees he will be able to manage for himself, and although he will be untidy at first, as indeed even seeing children are, patience will be rewarded in time. Progress must not be hurried, and if he gets tired with what after all is quite an effort for a small child, it is best to help him rather than to let him lose interest. Later on he will learn to use his spoon as older people do instead of holding it in his fist, but there need be no hurry over this.

Beginning to Walk

The mothers of seeing children sometimes have to be warned against the dangers of letting their babies walk too soon. In the case of the blind child there is little chance that he will want to walk before his bones are strong enough to bear his weight, as there is no encouragement for him to get at things beyond his reach, because he does not see them.

Learning to walk, however, is a very important step forward in the growth of the blind baby, for it enlarges his world in a way that is not always realised at first. The baby that can see lives in a world that contains many things beyond his reach ; he can lie in his cot and when his mother leaves his side and goes to the other end of the room he can still watch her as she moves to and fro. He can gaze up at the electric light in the ceiling, or watch the leaves flickering on a tree outside the window.

But the blind baby, until he has learnt to walk, lives in a far narrower circle, limited by the things that are within touching distance of his small arms, and not certain, when his mother leaves his side, whether she is still in the room or not, unless she talks to him, or he can hear her moving about. It is only when the blind baby has learned to walk that he finds that the things he could not reach from his cot can be secured by means of a journey, and so his world becomes a much bigger and more interesting place.

The First Steps

There is much that a mother can do to make things easier for her blind baby when he is learning to walk. Unlike seeing babies, blind babies often do not crawl before they walk, probably because things beyond their reach do not attract them, so that they are not very likely to come to grief on the floor. But the mother of the blind child who is learning to walk will always be careful that the furniture remains in the same position, that the fire-guard is firmly fixed or chained into place, and that all risks of accident are avoided. In the early stages of walking a pen is often useful, as the baby can pull himself up by the rails, and can guide his unsteady steps round it, as he holds on to the side.

Because a pen is so much smaller than a room, it tends to give the baby confidence, and a fall on to the soft rug inside it is less frightening than a fall on the floor outside.

It sometimes helps also for the child to have a go-cart, chair, or fairly large wooden horse, weighted in front to prevent its being tipped over by his rather unsteady movements, and he will enjoy pushing this before him, and gain confidence in movement in so doing.

Importance of Self Confidence

It is most important that a little blind child should not be made nervous by accidents, as fear can be a serious set-back to his progress. Of course, all babies are bound to have tumbles now and then, and such tumbles are naturally more alarming to those who cannot see. When they do occur, mother should always be at hand to reassure, so that the blind baby realises that he is not being left alone, and that he has a comforting hand or finger to steady his footsteps, and a familiar voice to encourage him. The task before the mother is not altogether easy, as she must avoid being over-anxious on the one hand lest her nervousness should have the effect of making her baby nervous, and on the other, she must remember that a blind child who is constantly hurting himself may grow discouraged, and disinclined to make any effort.

Later Stages in Walking

When journeys round the pen have made the baby fairly steady on his feet, he should be encouraged to travel round the room from chair to chair, and from chair to table, guided by his mother's voice, and encouraged as " Clever baby " when he is brave, and begins to take a step alone.

As his mother has talked to him when she has moved to and fro about the room while he lies in his cot, he will already have learned something of the direction from which the sounds about him come, and this will enable him to tell the difference between what is nearer and what is further away. When he has learned to go a little way alone, it is a good plan to play a game with him of " Finding Mother," who should stand a short distance off, and clap her hands, so that the sound may lead him to her, or call him so that he may be guided by her voice.

Babies may be taught to go up and down stairs as soon as they are used to standing on their feet, and

even before they have learnt to walk properly, and as a rule they prefer this to walking on a flat surface.

Walking Out of Doors

After the blind baby has learnt to find his way about the room in which he lives, and has become familiar with the position of the various pieces of furniture, one article may be moved (perhaps his chair, with a favourite toy laid on it) and he can be told to find it. He will enjoy doing this, and it will be a valuable game for him to play, as it will encourage him to be enterprising, and will also prepare him for changes in the arrangements of the furniture in other rooms and other houses. When he has learnt to find his way about the room in which he lives, he should be taken to the rest of the house, and into the garden or yard.

Here he will take an interest in new experiences, getting to feel the wind on his face, to hear the sound of raindrops and the song of birds, and to smell the scent of flowers. If there is room in the garden for him to run about, the Japanese wind-bells which can be bought at stores for a few pence will be useful in teaching him direction by means of sound.

As soon as he can run about, he should be taken out daily for a little walk, as the continuous steady exercise which this provides is very good for him.

Toys for the Blind Baby

A blind baby needs toys just as much as a seeing one, but they must be carefully chosen so as to appeal specially to the senses of touch and hearing. Grown-up people sometimes think that expensive and elaborate toys give children more pleasure than simple ones, but this is a mistake, and the blind child is happiest playing with something that is not too complicated.

The very little child will like to have toys that make a pleasant jingling noise, and a woolly ball, or

a soft "cuddly" animal with a bell attached will give him great pleasure; india-rubber toys that squeak when they are pressed are also suitable for the little ones. And just as the mother should mention the names of the garments as she dresses her blind baby, so she should give the toy its name as she hands it to him. As, unfortunately, the cuddly toy called a bunny or a pussy is generally very unlike the real bunny or pussy, it is perhaps best to call the toy " a toy bunny," and to allow the blind baby, whenever possible, also to handle a " live bunny " or " live pussy." Later on, when the blind baby is about two, cotton-reels strung together are a favourite toy, and he will begin to enjoy playing with wooden blocks, taking them in and out of their box, and putting them end to end; blocks that are fairly light, and are about two and a half inches square are best, but blocks of any kind give pleasure, and it is often possible to get them made at home.

Toys for the Older Child

The toys that are best of all for the older blind child are those that help him to do something, for they train his hands and arms to grasp and lift. For this reason any of the following are good: Boxes of all sorts that he can open and shut, fill and empty, sets of boxes that fit into one another, a bucket and spade that can be used in the garden, a wooden truck or wheelbarrow that he can drag about, dolls with clothes that take off and on, big wooden beads that can be threaded and beads strung on counting frames. Care should be taken to avoid toys with sharp edges, like tin engines, which convey little meaning to the blind child, and are apt to cut his fingers.

It is not necessary, or even desirable, that a blind child should have someone always at hand to play with him, for the really happy baby is one that can amuse himself, playing with his toys in the way he himself wants, instead of too much under the direction of a

grown-up person. Toys should be stored always on one shelf or in one cupboard, where the blind child can reach them without difficulty, and he should be trained to get them out, and to put them tidily away when finished with.

Music and the Blind Baby

We have spoken earlier of the important part that hearing plays in the blind child's life, and a word may be added here of music. Quite a young baby will take pleasure in listening while his mother sings nursery rhymes, and later, when he has learned to talk, he will like to say them for himself. Gramophone records of nursery rhymes are not expensive, and will also give pleasure, and there are often songs and gay music in the " Children's Hour " on the wireless, that the older blind child will enjoy hearing. Musical toys, especially drum, bells, tambourine, and triangle, interest the four and five-year-old, and also teach him a sense of rhythm. A blind child will take pleasure in hearing a lively rhythmic tune played on the piano, gramophone, or wireless, and he will like to accompany it himself with his musical toys.

Answering Baby's Questions

Just as every seeing baby asks questions, and soon wants to know " Why ? " so the blind baby who has been talked to, and encouraged in the various ways we have suggested, will soon want to know things for himself. Children's questions are not always easy to answer, and mothers sometimes get a little out of patience when one question follows another in an almost endless stream. But it is worth while to try to give satisfactory answers, and best of all to help the blind child to find out answers for himself.

It has to be remembered that the words which may be used to a seeing child will often convey nothing to a blind one, and to answer such a question as

"What's a pansy?" by saying that it is a pretty yellow and mauve and black flower, with petals like velvet wings, will be to give an answer which may mean nothing at all to a blind child. Only the seeing child, who has seen other flowers, who knows what colours are like, what is meant by wings, and has handled and seen velvet materials, would understand it. But let the blind child handle a pansy, feeling the delicate texture of its petals, tracing their general shape with his fingers, and smelling the fragrance of the flower, and he will gain some idea of its beauty. Better still, take him into a garden, and let him pick a pansy himself, and learn by having to stoop down that it does not grow on a tree, but close to the ground.

It is not, of course, always possible to give a blind child first-hand experience in answer to his questions, but whenever it can be done, the mother should try, so that experience, and not words, shall teach him. The little blind child should stroke pussy's sleek and glossy coat, learning to contrast it with the short rough coat of a neighbour's dog, or with the plumage of the chickens in the yard. These are lessons that he learns unconsciously, as he goes backwards and forwards with his mother about her household tasks, and they are every bit as important as the lessons he will later learn at school.

Going Shopping

When schooldays begin it is sometimes rather difficult for the teachers to take the blind children into towns, but the blind boy and girl can learn much by being taken out with mother when she goes shopping, if she will talk to them about it, telling them what she has bought at the grocer's or the draper's and on their return letting them handle the tea and sugar, the coffee and currants, the cottons and tapes that she has been buying, so that they know what they feel and smell like, and recognise the works that stand for them. Playing shop is always a very popular game, and can be very useful in teaching the blind

child the names of things he eats, what he wears, and what goes to furnish a home.

Helping Mother

This leads to another point. Although nobody would want a small child to do much to help in the home, nothing gives a child greater pleasure than the thought that he is "helping mother," and he will learn a lot if he trots after her while she does her work about the house, and is even allowed to do a little dusting or sweeping with a duster or small brush himself. He can help to make his own bed, and by handling the sheets and blankets will learn the difference in their textures, the order in which each is put on the bed, and the names of the various bed-coverings. In a sense much that he does will be only play, but it is useful play, for it is teaching him to be self-reliant, giving him new experiences, and introducing him to new words.

Brothers and Sisters

Where a blind child is the member of a family and has seeing brothers and sisters, their attitude to him is important. They must always treat him with consideration, watching that things are not left about where he is likely to knock into them, or hurt himself, though too much stress should not be laid by grown-ups on a child's blindness, as otherwise the seeing children in the family will be disinclined ever to let him join in their games for fear of accidents.

It is not fair to the seeing boys and girls of a family that they should always have the responsibility of a little blind child sharing their amusements, as it is bound to hamper their more active games, but they should be encouraged to have games sometimes in which he can safely take part, for there is nothing that can make his life happier or more natural than the society of those about his own age.

If a blind baby has no one in his own family to play with, an effort should be made to bring him into touch now and then with the seeing children of neighbours, so that when he goes to school he may not feel strange or lost in the company of other children. The little blind child who is " an only one " is apt sometimes to be too much the centre of care and affection in the home, and it is good for him to meet with other children on this account.

Some Blind Mannerisms

When little blind children begin to go to school, we are often told by their teachers that home training has failed to take proper account of what are called " blind mannerisms," which sometimes begin early in life, and should, if possible, be checked while the child is still quite young, and before the bad habit has become so firmly fixed that it is difficult to break.

Such a mannerism, and one of the most frequent, is that of poking the eyes with the fingers, and it is only by careful watching and great patience that a child can be cured. When a baby is still too young to understand that he must not do it, the gentle removing of the hand that has gone up to the eyes is all that can be done ; his attention should if possible be distracted to something else, or a toy given him that he has to hold with both hands. Later on, when the blind child is a little older, it often helps to tell him that " big children " don't do things like that.

Other mannerisms that are common are the waving of the fingers in front of the eyes, by children who can see just a little, in order that the light may come through, swaying of the body, and nervous movements of the hands or arms. All these are generally due to the fact that the blind child has, like other children, plenty of energy, but fewer opportunities on account of his blindness to work off that energy. If he can be given plenty of interests, they will disappear.

Holding the Head Down

Blind children are often inclined to hold their heads down, and this is sometimes due to the fact that the light is hurting their eyes. If a child does this, an oculist should be consulted, and he will sometimes advise the use of dark glasses. If, however, he says that the child holds his head down merely from habit because, unlike one who can see, he has no special reason for holding it erect to look about him, a careful watch must be kept, and the child helped to correct the mannerism by a reminder when he stands with his head down. Blind children should be encouraged to face towards the person whose voice they hear, as this makes them appear more normal.

Mannerisms in Walking

Some blind children tend to walk peculiarly, as they are inclined to push out one foot to act as a guide to feel the way. Running and jumping and standing up on tiptoe will all help to correct this, and it is well to let a blind child become used to walking in a fairly wide open space, where there is nothing to get in the way of his progress ; in this way he will gain confidence in movement, and overcome any tendency to shuffle along.

Homes for Blind Babies

It has only been possible in this leaflet to speak of a few of the ways in which the mother of a blind child should prepare him in the years before school-life begins for life in school. The task is not an easy one, and it will take all the love, understanding, and patience that a mother has.

It may be that this little book will be read by the mother of a blind baby who, anxious as she is to give her child every chance, has come to find that he needs

more time than she is justified in sparing from the rest of her home duties, and perhaps more skill than anyone inexperienced in the training of blind children can be expected to possess.

If this is so, will you consider very carefully the possibility of applying for your baby to be admitted to a residential home for blind babies? You can talk the matter over in the first instance with the Home Visitor or the Secretary of your local association for the blind, or, if you are not in touch with either of these, you can write for particulars to the National Institute for the Blind, 224 Great Portland Street, London, W.1.

To allow a baby to go into a residential home must always mean a wrench from any mother, but if it is in the child's interest, and will help your little boy or girl to grow up healthy, happy, and independent, ready to use to the full the advantages that school education will later offer, you will no doubt sacrifice your own present feelings to the child's future good. Life for the blind boy or girl is bound to be more difficult than for the seeing, and you owe it to your blind child to give him the best start possible.

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